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Barbara L. Loach

*Cedarville University*, loachb@cedarville.edu

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Shadow of The Patriarch:  
AMANDA LABARCA HUBERTSON'S VIEWS ON NORTH  
AMERICAN/LATIN AMERICAN RELATIONS

BARBARA LOACH

Cedarville University

USA

Amanda Labarca Hubertson (1886-1975) is recognized as one of Chile's foremost thinkers, educators and feminist leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the genre of travel writing comprises only a small part of Labarca's substantial writing career, the present essay under discussion, "From Chile," represents the culmination of observations and reflections on North American and Latin American cultures derived from Labarca's extended visits to the U.S. during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Originally developed as an unpublished essay called "Toward a Better Understanding" ("Hacia un entendimiento mejor"), this essay was included in the collection entitled *As Others See Us: The United States Through*

*Foreign Eyes*, edited by Franz M. Joseph in 1959. (Paul 2/27)<sup>1</sup> Like a number of other publications and activities sponsored by private pro-American foundations in years following World War II, this book containing Labarca's essay was commissioned by an educational organization, the American-European Foundation, ostensibly as a vehicle to promote cultural understanding but also undoubtedly to defend North American culture. (Berghahn 416) For Labarca, however, it represented the opportunity to condense half a century of experiences and reflections into one essay with the goal of promoting hemispheric understanding and mutual respect.

### Labarca's life and legacy

Amanda Labarca's impact on Chilean culture spanned three-quarters of the 20th century. From the time she was young, she manifested a singular independence of thought and was encouraged by her father to read, analyze and discuss important issues. (Pinto "Amanda Labarca" 53) Eventually, that spirit of independence led her to part ways with her parents and their beliefs, a move symbolized by her decision to drop her parents' surnames (Pinto and Sepúlveda) in favor of her husband's—Guillermo Labarca Hubertson—whom she married in 1906. After obtaining a teaching degree from the Pedagogical Institute in Santiago at the age of nineteen, Labarca, along with her husband, enrolled in Columbia University in New York in 1910. From there, accompanied by her husband, she continued her studies at the Sorbonne before returning to Chile to become the sub-director of a girls' school in Santiago. (Grandes biografías) Among her life's accomplishments, she became the first woman appointed as a regular professor in the Department of Philosophy and Humanities of the University of Chile in 1922, the national director of secondary education in 1931 (the highest government post ever held until that time by a woman), Chilean ambassador to the United Nations in 1946, co-organizer with Eleanor Roosevelt of the U.N. International Commission on Women in 1949, and was inducted into the Chilean Academy of Political, Moral and Social Sciences of the Institute of Chile in 1969. (Grandes biografías, Chaney 57, Pinto "Paradigma" 61) She was also active in founding the National Committee for the Rights of Women in 1933 (Comité Nacional pro Derechos de la Mujer) as well as the Chilean Federation of Women's Organizations (Federación Chilena de Instituciones Femeninas, FECHIF). Her writings include *Actividades Femeninas en*

*los Estados Unidos* (1914), *La Educación Secundaria en los Estados Unidos* (1919), *¿Adónde va la mujer?* (1934), *Feminismo Contemporáneo* (1947), and *Una mujer Enjuicia su Tiempo* (1969)<sup>2</sup>

The feminist dictum, "the personal is political," certainly holds true in Labarca's case: her early formative experiences in the U.S. helped shape her beliefs and perspectives on the role of women, beliefs which later had a significant impact on the status of women in her own homeland. And, eventually, as a result of her subsequent feminist activities at home and abroad, especially during her time of service with the United Nations, Labarca developed a voice with which to authoritatively critique patriarchal structures not only at an individual level but also nationally and internationally. Thus, writing in conformity with her views on the roles of men and women in society, in this essay Labarca employs a number of discursive strategies to convey her concerns about the role of the U.S. as the hemispheric patriarch, at times benevolent and at times domineering towards its southern neighbors. But just as she envisioned and advocated a new type of relationship between men and women, one based on equality and solidarity, Labarca also expressed hope for a new and improved relationship between North and South.

Labarca admits in the essay under study that she owes much of her feminist inspiration to the model displayed by women she observed in the United States. In her own words,

*I confess that when I arrived in the United States for the first time I was far from the convinced feminist I have been since. It was the example of the North Americans that impelled me to drive and struggle until I obtained more civil and political rights for my feminine compatriots. (Labarca 316)*

In particular, she highlights the strong character of North American women she observed and, for the most part, admired.<sup>3</sup> For example, during her first trip to the U.S., Labarca was impressed by women's clubs and the active role of women "in all branches of cultural, social, and philanthropic life" (311). In Labarca's opinion, the strength of women's clubs was that they enabled women to join together collectively to become a force for change in society. At the same time,

*Individually they [North American women] enjoyed a respect due not just to genteel masculine gallantry but to confidence in their own merits. One felt them to be conscious of themselves as*

*liberated personalities and masters of their destinies, free of the prejudices and timidities that still shackled their South American sisters.* (311)

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Labarca and other Latin American feminists, inspired by the activities of their North American sisters, focused primarily on social reform, such as legal and social equality, for women in their own homelands. As Elsa Chaney explains it, the so-called "first generation" Latin American feminists chose to work within the male-dominated system to achieve initial legal and social reforms and gain the right to vote for women (in contrast to succeeding generations of feminists who have fought for full equality) (Loach 49, 52). Thus, Asunción Lavrín describes Labarca as a feminist "in a sui generis manner" because, while she defended divorce legislation, full civil rights for women and equal access to education for women, she also affirmed that the main role of women was to shape and maintain the spiritual atmosphere of the home. (Lavrín 321n). Furthermore, even though she encouraged women to develop a greater sense of their own value, their legal equality and their entitlement to greater economic freedom, she lamented the consequent loss of masculine respect or male homage toward women and the possible jeopardizing of marital prospects, since educated women appealed less to men. (Lavrín 321n). Although, as Chaney points out, Labarca and her generation of feminists did little to change the image that had kept women out of politics for so long, i.e., that of being above *politiquería*, a purifying influence, one that would "infuse society with the womanly virtues," (Chaney 76) they did work patiently within the framework of a patriarchal social structure to unite women and change the thinking of politicians who doubted that women had the mental capacity to vote intelligently or the interest to do so. (Lavrín 310) In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America, the juxtaposition of women's rights and men's privileges was not seen as entirely incompatible; the shadow of patriarchal social structures was by no means eliminated during that time frame, although it was certainly highlighted and challenged at a number of key points.

### A double-voiced discourse

Labarca's discursive strategies reflect a similar duality that alternates between a personal, subjective voice and a more objective, authoritative discourse, attempting consciously or unconsciously to capitalize on the

strengths of both. Not unlike women travel writers before her, Labarca combines "the understanding of an insider ... with the detachment and objectivity of an outsider" in order to establish her authority to speak. (Birkett 176) Indeed, Labarca's discursive strategies in this essay combine a number of "transgressive" elements (to use Patricia Pinto's descriptor), both assertive and surreptitious, as she seeks to persuade her audience. (Pinto "Mirada," 61) First, as a female essayist, Labarca transgresses the normal expectations for women writers by appropriating for herself the traditionally male domain of the essay genre, and also by breaking with literary convention in choosing to refer to herself in the first person singular as opposed to first person plural (either masculine or feminine in Spanish). (Pinto "Mirada," 63; Rojas and Sternbach 175) By doing so, she asserts her right to be an authoritative subject of discourse in this topic as well as in other topics usually considered outside the domain of women. But at the same time, aware of the boastful arrogance of her American readers, she also resorts to several instances of self-deprecation, expressing admiration for American qualities in contrast to those behaviors displayed by her compatriots. For example, in contrasting the North American tendency to boastfulness with the Chilean aversion to it, Labarca observes that "what I first judged to be an unpleasant fault could in fact serve as a springboard for constant excelling; and that of the two extremes, the North American was more constructive than the Chilean...." And, in another example, "It struck me that we Chileans are more courteous in words and deportment, but not always so disposed to help our neighbor" (Labarca 310-11). Thirdly, she also resorts to a type of oblique "shaming" technique or subtle irony as she reports the completely negative view of the U.S. held by the Chilean masses—a view she insists that her enlightened colleagues know not to be the truth:

*I believe I am not in error when I consider my views common to the enlightened classes of my country. They are not those of the extreme left, or of the ultra-nationalists, or of the half-educated public for whom the name United States is synonymous with capitalism and merciless exploitation. These groups believe that the United States' gestures of friendship are a crass hypocrisy, and that under the mantle of aid is hidden a greedy desire to get hold of our wealth or —cleverly and to its own advantage—to direct our internal policy.* (322)

### Pawns or partners?

Overall, the structure of the essay "From Chile" blends personal narrative in which Labarca describes each of her successive visits to the United States with personal reflection regarding what she has seen and how it compares to Chilean culture. She specifically mentions her first visit to New York City in 1911; her summer in New England in 1912; an educational research mission for the Chilean government to Berkeley, California in 1918 which then led to travels to Burlington, Iowa; Cincinnati, Ohio; St. Louis, Missouri; Berea College in Kentucky, and the Hampton Institute in Virginia; another trip to Berkeley and two Midwestern universities in 1939; and her two years of service for the United Nations in New York, 1948-1949. During those visits she encountered people from various backgrounds and social classes, ranging from modest New Englanders of Puritan heritage to oppressed African-Americans in the Southern states to ruthless politicians and businessmen in New York. It was during her tenure with the United Nations that she developed her most comprehensive understanding of the character and values of the American people and their leaders. In general, the qualities Labarca observes in Americans are those typically noticed by foreigners: the positive characteristics of generosity, hospitality, religiosity, optimism, and equality and the negative characteristics of ignorance, materialism, arrogance, ambition, racism, and ruthless pragmatism. In this essay, she identifies three aspects of American life that she found particularly shocking as she describes her first encounters with this culture. During her first visit to the U.S., she was struck by the boastfulness of the North American masses and "their tendency to consider their possessions the 'greatest' or 'best' in the world." (Labarca 310) An even greater shock presented itself to her when she had the opportunity to visit the Southern states and observe discriminatory attitudes toward and treatment of African-Americans. She claims not to have known racial prejudice prior to this experience, either in her homeland or in her travels in the northern United States. She describes what she saw as "distressing" and "revolting" and in complete opposition to both Christian and democratic principles. (314-315) Labarca suggests that where white Americans see race as the source of potential crime or moral evil, they need to recognize the effects of "crass ignorance and hopeless poverty" which can drag down any individual, regardless of race. (315) The third cultural shock she describes co-

mes from her encounters with American big businessmen. In her eyes, the private virtues of individual Americans are offset by the public conduct of representatives of the American government and business sector and are subject to being corrupted by an increasingly aggressive, utilitarian and mechanistic society. As she explains it:

The reigning impression in enlightened Chilean circles is that two governments coexist in the United States: a visible one, whose seat is in Washington; and one that is invisible, in some ways more powerful, aggressive, and implacable.... The officers of this invisible government are a limited few, and do not represent the general character of the good common people. (322)

Labarca also sees this invisible government controlled by big business interests as the greatest obstacle to establishing harmonious relations between the United States and the rest of the hemisphere:

As long as they [businessmen] are the ones who manipulate, behind the scenes, the policy of the United States with respect to these nations of ours, any amount of education for harmony will fail because of the basic discrepancy between what Washington says and what Wall Street does. (324)

Considering the intensity of U.S. governmental and commercial involvement in her country during this time, Labarca's comments demonstrate a great degree of self-restraint and diplomacy. The historical context in which Labarca writes the essay "From Chile" is significant at both an international and a national level. It is common knowledge that, historically, the United States has maintained a policy of military intervention and economic diplomacy in an attempt to control the governments of a number of Latin American countries, including Panama, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, to mention but some of the most outstanding examples. According to Brian Loveman, Chile as well became a "Cold War battleground" in the 1950s (Loveman 374) as the U.S. government sent agents and diplomats into the country to "influence elections, manipulate labor organizations, disseminate American policy perspectives, and defend American investments" as a reaction to the growing popularity of the Communist and Socialist parties in Chile. (Loveman 234) U.S. economic interests in Chile had already been a major factor since World War I, when American investors came to control over 87 percent by value of Chilean copper production, and in the 1930s, when United States capital had come to com-

prise some 70 percent of all foreign investment in Chile, overshadowing the investments of Chile's traditional trading partners, Britain and Germany. (213) Consequently, the U.S. government saw the rise of the Chilean Left as a threat that could destabilize the country and jeopardize American investments.

Within Chile itself, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw increasing resistance to the traditional power of wealthy landowners and right-wing politicians who suppressed any motion to change Chilean society and improve the lot of the masses. Throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, a number of left-wing political parties gained popular support especially among the working class, prompting responses from the government that alternated between gestures designed to appease these groups and repress them. For example, Amanda Labarca and her husband were both active in the center-left Radical Party, whose platform included support for the separation of church and state; an expansion of individual liberties; state support for free, obligatory secular education; and improved conditions for workers and women. (Tenenbaum 133) In 1928 Labarca was dismissed from her university post and, along with her "anarchist" husband, exiled to Concepción by the government of Carlos Ibañez. (Boschetto 92) It was a significant event in the history of Chile, then, in 1949 when Chilean women, led by Labarca and others, received the right to vote for president, the culmination of almost half a century of struggle. The year 1952 saw the return to power of the strongman Carlos Ibañez, the dictator who ruled Chile from 1927-1931. President Ibañez attempted to provide stability for the country without effecting significant change, in essence causing more people to throw their support to candidates such as the Marxist Salvador Allende in the 1958 presidential election, much to the dismay of the U.S. government. (Pike 243-270)

It was within this tense historical context that Labarca penned this essay. In addition to her praises and concerns regarding the North American culture and its pervasive influence on her country, Labarca's essay portrays the U.S. as a decidedly patriarchal entity in opposition to its southern neighbors. She characterizes this nation as rational, utilitarian, and mechanistic, believing itself to represent the Subject, the One and Only, to which all other nations are merely Other and incidental (Guerra 36-37):

Ordinarily every person, every country, believes that his way is not only the best but the only one that is good,

and he is prone to impose it on others come what may. . . . The "American way" is no doubt the best for North Americans, but this does not imply that it is the best for others. (Labarca 323)

Furthermore, this patriarchal attitude manifests itself in a lack of communication and understanding towards the Other and a tendency to disparage and manipulate the Other who is perceived as weak (Pinto "Paradigma" 63). As Labarca describes her first encounter with "big businessmen" in the U.S. in 1939, she expresses this deep concern:

Their mentality not only surprised me; it terrified me. No consideration of noble political aims, of continental solidarity, of the construction of a surer and more lasting peace could move them. They felt that the businessman has the duty to his stockholders, to the suppliers of the capital, to produce the highest possible profit. And if certain governments and small republics object, capital has the right—not only the right but the duty—to employ any kind of compulsion for the protection of its interests. (Labarca 316)

The only response left to the Other in this type of relationship, whether on the personal level or the international level, is to withdraw in suspicion and distrust, making communication and understanding even more unattainable. Labarca expresses that very opinion when she notes that "Suspicion is rooted in many [of my compatriots] who fear that these Americas will end by being only dependencies of the United States." (322)

As Boschetto has observed in her analysis of Labarca's other writings, there is a tendency for Labarca to express her thoughts in a binary structure in which she acknowledges that she is both victim and agent within a system of domination. (Boschetto 96) While Boschetto's remarks refer primarily to Labarca's personal reflections on her own status as a woman as well as the status of women in general, the same construct can apply to her perceptions regarding the relationship between her country and the United States. In this essay, she takes the opportunity to express her concerns regarding the realities of victimization of South America by the North as well as her views on how the situation needs to change in the future. For example, she reminds her American readers that "Latin America is the natural ally of the North. It has demonstrated this in times of war, when it has not hesitated to put at the disposal of the United States its potential in raw materials, or even to mortgage its future." (324) Implied is the belief that Latin America's

willing sacrifice of her own progress for the greater cause should not be turned into continued opportunities to take advantage of the South's generosity.

### The quest for equality

In contrast to such a "dysfunctional polarity" (Boschetto 93) that cripples both marriage relationships and international relationships, Labarca calls upon her audience to consider a new relationship built on complementarity and solidarity. (Lavrín 316) She insists that the United States needs to realize that it shares common interests, convictions, and ideals with its Latin American neighbors.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, she expresses appreciation for the cultural uniqueness of each hemisphere and concern for the influence that the U.S. media exerts towards cultural uniformity. (Labarca 321) Without directly criticizing the U.S., she points out that "the United States cannot alone, despite its present colossal riches, oppose two unrelenting threats to its existence: Communist power and the poverty of great masses of people" in the world (323). In her eyes, it is "to our mutual advantage that we Latin American nations be helped—and not in a spirit of charity—to raise our buying power, our standard of living." (323) Just as Labarca advocates more economic independence for the women of her country (Pinto "Paradigma" 62), she sees the economic prosperity of the hemisphere as a key to "hemispheric harmony" (Labarca 324). She also advocates more communication and cultural understanding between the two hemispheres as a means to break down barriers, to contribute toward the prosperity and effectiveness of the United States and to diminish the enticement of Communism in Latin America (324). Labarca's optimistic "utopic impulse" (Boschetto 93) is to create a hemisphere which will be "the home of a just democracy, ... a family of nations without the scourge of poverty, and therefore...a peaceful humanity" (Labarca 324).

Patricia Pinto refers to Labarca's feminist essays as an expression of her understanding of the male-female dilemma and the desire for integration. Pinto notes that Labarca believes that it is necessary not only for women to claim their rights, but also for them to initiate an invitation to dialogue, with the realization that men are also prisoners of a patriarchal system that leaves them incomplete and alienated as they act in unilateral fashion (Pinto "Amanda Labarca", 61). In this essay, Labarca seems to be offering such an invitation for dialogue between the two hemispheres. Again, in her own words,

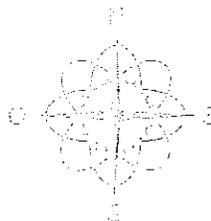
Today North and South America face common dangers. Is the hand extended to us by the North that of a friend, of a master disguised as an elder brother, or that of a ruthless trafficker? I have the faith that it can come to be that of a friend, provided we clear the southern mind of misunderstanding, suspicions and grievances; provided, too, that the people of the North learn how and in what specific ways we are different, and value, at the same level as their own, our efforts to organize a kind of life consonant with our history and temperament. (Labarca 309)

In her view, U.S. culture is incomplete without Latin American culture—reason without passion, mechanization without art and culture. At the same time, she suggests that Latin Americans can learn from North American social democracy and work ethic (Labarca 320-321) In her most insightful metaphor, Labarca compares the nature of North Americans and Latins to, respectively, sheets of paper and Chinese boxes. In her mind, Americans seem simple, "as free of complications, as a sheet of paper on which all sorts of things are printed, some abhorrent, others intelligent and beautiful, but no longer mysterious once the language in which they are written is understood" (312) In contrast, Latin character unfolds one layer at a time: "like those little Chinese boxes, each containing another of a smaller size: it is not simple to go through all the back rooms of our personalities; in our daily dealings we tell the truth, but not always all of it; even in our inmost heart it is difficult to reach the most recondite part of our 'I.'" (312) Because of fundamental differences like these, establishing a basis of mutual respect and understanding and of equality and solidarity between the two hemispheres has been slow in evolving. Indeed, Labarca's invitation to do away with the unilateral nature of our lives and our world has yet to be completely accepted—whether on an interpersonal level in the relations between men and women, or on international level between sovereign nations.<sup>5</sup>

Labarca's views and comments, produced a half-a-century ago, still have an uncanny and convincing relevance today. According to Rojas and Sternbach, the ultimate purpose of the essay for Latin American women writers has been, not the "glorification of the author (the 'I')", but rather a transformation of society, and by implication, women's roles in it," producing a sense of urgency that conveys to the reader "the desire to change the world." (Rojas and Sternbach 183) Even though more than forty years have passed since the writing of this

essay, the urgent need for establishing a mature relationship among countries in this hemisphere is still a vital issue. Labarca's desire for more equitable relationships between men and women—and between nations as well—holds the promise of gain for all involved. As

the United States and Latin America enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century and their leaders talk of entering a new era of cooperation and mutual support, we can only hope that the patriarch's shadow will diminish and that the secure and harmonious "family of nations" that Labarca envisioned will finally become a reality.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Labarca's essay was translated from Spanish by James F. Shearer and may have been slightly edited before reaching this, its final version.
- <sup>2</sup> Feminine Activities in the United States, Secondary Education in the United States, Where are Women Going?, Contemporary Feminism, and A Woman Judges Her Time.
- <sup>3</sup> For a more detailed comparison of the models provided by North American women and Latin American women as described by Labarca, see Patricia Pinto, "El paradigma masculino/femenino en el discurso narrativo de Amanda Labarca," *Letras Femeninas*, 16 (1990), 64-65.
- <sup>4</sup> As Catharine Manny Paul indicates, Labarca's first novel, *En tierras extrañas* [In Foreign Lands], is based on her first trip to the U.S. and as such is a dramatization of the thesis that

"each nation ha[s] its own gifts of culture, which, if shared, would make for mutual enrichment" (*En tierras extrañas*, 325, as cited in Paul, *Amanda Labarca*, 6/8).

- <sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the type of economic assistance that Labarca recommended was outlined in 1961 with President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress program. Ostensibly, this "ten-year program of aid to Latin America aimed at demonstrating that democratic reforms could be more effective than the communist revolution preached by Fidel Castro...." (Sigmund 239) Yet although the U.S. considered Chile to be a showcase of the alliance, this form of international aid did not come without conditions or consequences such as the political turmoil into which Chile was plunged during the late 1960's and on into the Pinochet era.

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